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Letter to the members of the American Fern Society

ROBERT A. WARE

It is probable that among the first questions that come to the mind of one who finds himself the nominal head of any organization, are those which pertain to the larger usefulness and greater efficiency of that organization. Since a turn in the wheel of fortune has brought me into this new relation with this society, I have been asking myself what can be done to make it more interesting, more profitable, more worth while. Without expecting too much, and yet with a desire to stimulate if I may, the fruitful energies of our society, I venture to offer several suggestions pointing to that desired end.

I believe that it is proper that we should ask ourselves these two questions, viz: What may I expect to gain from the society? What can I do to make the society more interesting and more profitable to all members? The thoughtful consideration of these questions will in itself, I believe, contribute toward realizing the purposes for which the society was organized. And from the beginning it is well to recognize that the society will be what we make it, nothing more, and that much depends upon our answer to the last of these two questions.

Now what are our resources? We have an organization of about 250 members, scattered over the United States and elsewhere, having a common interest and who, it may be assumed, have become members with the belief that something was to be gained thereby. Our membership includes men and women of various attainments, from those who are making botanical science their profession to those whose satisfaction is found in beholding with glad and satisfied eyes the glory and the beauty of the living plant in its natural habitat.

We have a society "Journal" splendidly edited, well

printed, creditable in every way, and in which we can all take pride.

We have a society herbarium, instituted through the initiative of the late Alvah A. Eaton and recently, by the commendable efforts of our present energetic curator, put into more available shape for use, from which any member may, by paying the cost of transportation, borrow authoritatively named specimens with which to compare his own.

Finally we have the postal service, making communication easy.

Here, then, are resources at hand sufficient to bring to us individually far more than most of us are at present realizing.

I am disposed to believe that our members generally would welcome a larger intercourse. While no doubt there are those who are so occupied with their professional duties that they would find it difficult to take on additional correspondence, there are, I am convinced, many of our members who would gladly find time in which to satisfy any genuine appeal for help or advice. But it is not the advanced student alone to whom we may look for increased activity. Surely we all know the value of comparing notes with those whose studies and observations, although along similar lines, have yet been different from our own. Such exchange of experiences is both interesting and stimulating. Then, too, most of us enjoy having questions put to us, not that we always answer them offhand, but because we want to answer them, because they set us to thinking and to investigating, and because they give us a keener relish for the subject itself. And then there is always coming into the field a new generation of beginners with their refreshing enthusiasm and eager inquisitiveness, one of the best things in our society. These should be made to feel that they are welcomed into a fellowship whose spirit

is one of helpfulness. They should be made to feel, also, that fern students, whether advanced or beginners, need no special introduction to each other, but that our common membership may be counted as sufficient ground for approach, and that any hesitation lest our advances shall not be looked upon with cordiality should be put aside. I would therefore urge those who are not already doing so, to write some of their fellow members, write if only to ask a question and then follow where that step shall lead.

It is to be hoped that, with all proper regard for the preservation of the wild plants, you are forming an herbarium. This contributes to one's cumulative knowledge and serves as a valuable record of what he has accomplished and as a basis for further study. Here again is a channel through which you can work to your own and others' advantage. Offer the plants of your region, or any surplus you may have from elsewhere, to another, in exchange for those he may be able to send you. We are sometimes inclined to say that only the common species grow in our neighborhood and that no one wants them. Perhaps we need to be reminded that the "common" species of one region may be uncommon or rare or even entirely absent in another region. Moreover, one who aspires to a broad outlook over the fern world is not satisfied with the fact that the several species are represented in his herbarium; he aims to show their range, together with variation due to soil, climate, local environment, and other conditions, and therefore wants examples of the species from many different regions. Occasionally we learn of one who is making a special study of a single genus or species. Such a student finds it necessary to examine a great many plants of that group, and you can help him by sending him material. So I repeat: write, put your questions, offer your duplicate plants; and if your experience proves to be anything like mine, you will get help and a lot more besides.

As to the JOURNAL, although we have an able editor we should not let him carry the burden alone. It is safe to say that he welcomes contributions not only of a technical, somewhat ponderous character, but others as well in lighter vein, short, pointed, crisp notes, and the simple reports of observations in the field or elsewhere. Such as these we all enjoy, for they give life and zest to a periodical and are much to be desired. The things that have interested you are likely to interest others, and one need not be a skillful writer to tell of the things which have interested him, nor should he wait for the time when he may write a fine "article." We want the variety which results from many contributors. Furthermore, this society, because of its widely scattered membership, lacks an advantage possessed by many organizations, in that it is unable to get its members together in any considerable numbers for acquaintance and discussion. This emphasizes the desirability both of making more use of the JOURNAL as a medium of interchange, and of the development of individual correspondence. I wish that we might have a discussion of these very points in the pages of the JOURNAL. Send in your questions to the editor. He will answer them, and he may find some of them of sufficient general interest to warrant their publication, together with his answers or comments. Here is a way in which both expert and novice can help.

It should not be forgotten that the society herbarium will be increased in value to the extent that it is made to contain the various species in large numbers. Here is another way in which you can help, by sending ample material, even of the common species from your region. When you are collecting for yourself have the society herbarium in mind and collect for that also. Send the plants to the curator, who will welcome and acknowledge them. If it is convenient for you to send them well

mounted on standard herbarium sheets it will be so much more a help, but that is not necessary. And if you cannot send many, send a few.

Finally, you can help by giving to the officers your criticisms and your suggestions for making the society more helpful. Therefore, do not hesitate to express your sentiments.

By the foregoing it will be seen that I am more inclined to suggest ways in which one can contribute to the general good than direct ways in which he can secure benefits. The truth is, I believe the second is more than likely to be wrapped up in the first, and that he who is disposed to consider ways in which he can be useful will soon find himself gaining as much as, if not more than, he is giving. This is probably no less true in this matter than in most affairs of life.

It will be very gratifying to note an increased utilization of the excellent resources we have at our command. I hope that there are those who will be stimulated to greater activity through some suggestion found herein, and that all of us will experience more satisfaction than can possibly come from simply seeing our names on the list of members and in paying our annual dues.

BOSTON, MASS.